

Social Emotional Learning: Implementation of Sustainability-Oriented Program in Latvia

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Abstract

This article is focused on the description of the content and the implementation process of an originally developed, culturally appropriate and sustainable social and emotional learning program in Latvia. The article also includes the teachers' self-reflected experience illustrated through the perspective of the program's sample activities. The general goal of the program is to develop the emotional and social competencies of pupils, and at the same time to introduce to schoolteachers the principles necessary for combining academic and social emotional learning. As a preventive approach this program is aimed at all ages of pupils (from primary forms to secondary grades). During the school years 2012/13 and 2013/14 the social emotional learning program was introduced in 39 schools in Latvia (a total of 12 699 pupils). The participants implementing the program were 630 classroom teachers (614 female and 16 male with the mean age 45.04 years). As a result of the program implementation, social and emotional learning principles became a common approach for the entire school; the teachers became well versed on social emotional issues and received materials for conducting class lessons at each level; regular teacher supervisions were provided; regional supervisors were trained to sustain the pedagogical practice.

Keywords: social emotional learning, sustainability, schools, emotional competence, social competence

Introduction and Background

A combination of academic and social emotional learning is crucial for achieving the educational goals of the 21st century. Today's schools in many countries are pressured to take greater responsibility for children's social emotional literacy, which previously had been the function of the family. This is due to several reasons, for example, change in family structure, weakened contact with extended family and local community, increasing impact of media. As a result, a significant segment of children come to school with insufficient skills in behavioural and emotion regulation, social awareness and communication. In order to develop and strengthen the aforementioned cognitive, emotional and behavioural skills, various social and emotional learning programs have

been developed and implemented worldwide during the past decades. By developing children's social and emotional skills, the relationship and collaboration between pupils and teachers is strengthened, study motivation is stimulated, and these improvements can facilitate the pupils' attachment to school. These programs aim to increase the pupils' ability to be attentive, listen, be calm, regulate their emotions and collaborate with others. This should help pupils to behave better and to learn more effectively. Educational standards generally require pupils to obtain a wide spectrum of knowledge, and if the pupil is aware of the interrelationships between different forms of knowledge and his/her individual needs, it should be easier to maintain motivation and to overcome obstacles. This should facilitate greater self-confidence and lead to an increase in academic achievement (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005). An increase in goal setting and problem solving skills should also empower the learner within the learning process (Elias, 2005).

Educators know that not all students with equal academic abilities are able to achieve the same success in their work and family life. The development of social and emotional competence is very important for it helps pupils to interact better with teachers and peers, maintain motivation, set goals, solve problems, learn more effectively, and to participate more fully in family, work and community lives.

The idea of social emotional learning has been brought to the attention of educators by Daniel Goleman (1995) in his elaboration of the concept of emotional intelligence (previously developed by Leuner, 1966; Greenspan, 1989; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Emotional intelligence includes the ability to identify and regulate one's emotions in an appropriate way as well as to recognize and tolerate emotions of others. The ability to behave adequately, to manage one's emotions and overcome difficulties not only leads to personal satisfaction and psychological well-being, but also strengthens one's sense of belonging and increases motivation. While emotional intelligence is mostly related to the understanding and governing of one's emotions and inner potential, the social intellect (Goleman, 2006) is realized in the ability to form adequate interpersonal communication.

Social and emotional learning programs are competence-based, and one of their cornerstones is the understanding of competence as the flexible ability to use personal and environmental resources in order to reach adaptive goals (Waters & Sroufe, 1983). The key aspect for social and emotional education is skill training simultaneously with practical implementation and consistent maintaining of the practice in everyday life in all school settings. Therefore, by implementing social emotional learning in schools, the program becomes an integral part of the education process thus promoting sustainability. The integration of academic and social emotional learning is an approved approach for developing each student's potential (Elias, 2003) and 80% of students benefit from universal level social and emotional learning (SEL) programs conducted by classroom teachers (casel.org). A longitudinal study (Malecki & Elliot, 2002) has confirmed that children with positive behaviour and good social skills tend to have higher academic achievement. The meta-analysis of various universal level SEL programs has shown that social and emotional skills can be taught to students, and that their presence improves academic learning and behavioural adjustment. The researchers found that SEL programs are effective at all educational levels in urban and rural areas, and that classroom teachers can effectively conduct these programs (Durlak et al., 2011).

The learning process is based on students' collaboration with peers and adults; therefore, besides the emphasis on the development of social and emotional competencies, it is important for teachers to develop positive relationships with pupils. A good relation-

ship is the basis for positive teaching and positive discipline. Emotions influence the learning process, relationship quality and health; emotions can either stimulate or decrease students' learning motivation (Durlak et al., 2011). Other researchers also underline the importance of relationships between teachers and pupils (Azzam, 2007; Klem & Connell, 2004; Geving, 2007). Expectations of pupils' achievements and support in the learning process from teachers and parents play a significant role. Positive reinforcement and proactive support of positive behaviour from adults, as well as cooperative learning with peers can lead to a stronger attachment to the school. In this way the development of positive pupil – teacher relationships, the existence of positive expectations from teachers and appropriate teaching practices, school environment factors and focus on SEL competencies contribute to pupils' short-term and long-term behavioural change (Catalano et al., 2002), as well as diminish disengagement from school (Willie, 2000; Black, 2002; Finn, 1993, as mentioned in Davis et al., 2004).

Furthermore, social and emotional learning programs in schools can proactively protect teachers against teacher burn-out, and these programs can facilitate teachers' perceived self-efficacy, which is an important aspect of re-defining the teacher's role. For the teacher it means not only to be the provider of academic knowledge, but also to be a person who aims to educate pupils about emotional and relationship issues, who helps them to develop their emotion regulation and relationship skills, and who facilitates the creation of a positive emotional climate in the classroom and school as a whole (Olweus, 2011).

Before the development of the first social emotional learning program in Latvia, the initial research study on social exclusion risks was conducted in 25 Latvian schools (Raščevska, Raževa, Martinsone, Tūbele, Vucenlazdāns, & Vazne, 2012). The teachers reported that there were a large percentage of pupils who had insufficient academic achievement level and/or emotional and behaviour problems. The study results showed a significant correlation between teacher-reported ratings of learning difficulty, impulsivity, aggressive behaviour, self-regulation problems, anxiety and dysfunctional family/ social factors for 12 – 19 year old pupils. It was concluded that a program persistently facilitating the development of social and emotional skills would be very important for all children, but perhaps even more so for children with learning difficulties, because the behavioural and emotional problems could be both contributing factors as well as sequel of the learning difficulties. The pupils with primary difficulty in emotion and/or behaviour regulation are in the greater need of learning self-regulation skills. However, for those pupils who have no learning, behaviour and/or emotion self-regulation problems, it is nevertheless important to also develop greater social and emotional competence because this will help them in various aspects of life in the future, and it will also help to strengthen their attachment to school. Thus, the program "Sociāli emocionālā audzināšana" (further the abbreviation SEA – from the program's title in Latvian will be used) is focused on developing both emotional and social intelligence abilities by developing a variety of pupils' skills via focused and targeted actions.

Characteristics of Sustainable Social Emotional Learning Program

Researchers agree that direct social emotional learning in classroom setting in year-by-year programs in combination with permanent integration of principles in all school settings are effective in short-term, but it is very important to prepare the school to

sustain the program for more than several years (Elias, 2010). It means that the program must become an integral and regular part of school practices (despite budget challenges, changes in personnel etc.). There are six indicators uniquely supportive of a program's sustainability (suggested by Elias, 2010) – 1) engagement of new administrators (support system for teachers beyond the school's local staff), 2) program consultations for school staff (program developer or outside expert consultation), 3) on-going training and professional development (constant training of staff and refreshment of practice, as well as opportunity for teachers to reflect on what has been done and how they feel about it), 4) involvement of role model teachers – instructional leaders (those who understand the program principles deeply and help to sustain the program through adapting it to actual situations), 5) program's integration in the whole school curriculum, routine and climate, 6) access to external funding. According to the model of sustainability planning (Johnson et al., 2004), five steps of action should be taken – assessment, development, implementation, evaluation, and reassessment/modification.

The SEA program is based on these findings respecting the importance of teachers' education, assistance during implementation, organizing regular supervisions (provided by program developers), strong cooperation with school principals/administration and preparation of program's consultants in local municipalities. Thus the support network for the SEA program sustainability was created with the hope that after the European funding expires, the involved schools will be able to sustain the practice at a similar standard (level of quality).

The goal of this paper is to introduce the SEA – the first social emotional learning program developed in Latvia, and to illustrate its sustainability. As illustrative examples two of the SEA program activities will be presented: one classroom lesson and one prosocial activity project. The teachers' experience in implementing the SEA activities will be illustrated with the examples of the teachers' self-reflections expressed during the group supervision sessions.

Methodology

SEA Program Description

The SEA program is based on two reciprocal educational strategies for implementing social and emotional learning in schools. The first strategy has a greater focus on systematic and appropriate instruction of social and emotional issues, and the second strategy is focused upon the development of social and emotional skills, establishing a safe environment and participating in activities which help to integrate the school community, as suggested by Durlak (Durlak et al., 2011). The SEA program is aimed at all pupils and is implemented in the entire school simultaneously. This program was developed and implemented together with another program "Support for Positive Behaviour", which also included the participation of all pupils within the school. Both of the programs were based on an initial analysis of already existing social, emotional and behavioural programs in other countries. The programs developed in Latvia included elements from various programs from other countries, but these elements were combined so that the programs in Latvia were developed specifically for the cultural context of Latvia. The purpose was to promote the sustainability of programs – to educate teachers and involve schools' principals in order to integrate the topics in the curriculum and

even change school climate, as well as provide teachers with work materials for the subsequent years and create a support network for teachers.

The SEA program was designed with the aim to develop pupils' social and emotional competencies so that the pupils may effectively self-regulate their own emotions, communicate positively, set realistic goals and solve problems responsibly.

The SEA program covers four major themes that correspond to core competencies of social and emotional intelligence: emotional self-regulation, positive social interaction, setting realistic and positive goals, and problem solving (see Table 1).

Table 1
Major Themes of the SEA Program

The SEA themes	Contents
1. Recognition and expression of emotions and empathy. Emotion self-regulation.	Students develop skills to recognize and name different emotions, to understand ambivalent emotions; they learn about and practice methods of emotion regulation; they develop the ability to take another's perspective regarding thoughts and feelings; they develop an ability to acknowledge and enhance their own positive traits.
2. Positive social interaction models.	Students develop an understanding of various social situations; they learn to work together and cooperate with people they disagree with, to understand their individual responsibility, to act in a polite and morally acceptable way, to respect the differences in other people, cultures, opinions, as well as to reject provocations and to seek assistance when necessary.
3. Setting realistic and positive goals.	Students are encouraged to realize their personal resources and abilities, to develop planning skills and set short- and long-term goals; they also learn to evaluate the effectiveness of their actions, and change ineffective methods and strategies.
4. Problem solving.	Students practice solving problems creatively by first exploring various available alternatives. They also learn direct communication skills, which are necessary to arrive at a compromise, and learn to recognize and prevent the escalation of a conflict.

The four major themes at each grade level remain the same, only the content depends on the pupils' age. Thereby each theme is taught and the respective skills are obtained, strengthened and developed progressively year by year, thus maintaining their relevance and creating a persistent basis for the further development of pupils' social and emotional competency.

A set of well-defined lesson plans together with additional materials relevant to all SEA topics are offered to the teachers. The Teacher's Handbook includes a theoretical framework of the SEA program; detailed and structured lesson plans; CD with additional materials (video clips, written scenarios and situations for discussion and role-play, informative texts and interviews for reading, work sheets and PowerPoint presentations with illustrative materials), and a glossary of core concepts. Social and emotional learning is implemented through practical skill-learning activities – participation in discussions, group work, role-plays, behaviour modelling, research, projects, actions and the prosocial activity projects. Each activity has a detailed plan with a clear goal and common structure.

From the first to the tenth grade there are structured class sessions (two class hours for each topic, for a total of 8 class hours per school year) supervised by a teacher. Students of Grades 11 and 12 do not have SEA class sessions but they are engaged in prosocial activity projects, in which they use SEA competencies acquired in previous years. However, this is the first social emotional learning program in Latvia; therefore the students of older grades quite often do not have the basic knowledge in social and emotional issues. For that reason teachers were encouraged to conduct SEA lessons from the younger grades instead of prosocial activity projects when appropriate for the specific class.

Structure of the SEA Lesson and Teacher's Role

Each SEA lesson has a well-defined, detailed, structured plan, consisting of the aim and the contents of the lesson. The originally tailored and culturally appropriate additional materials are provided for nearly every theme.

The lessons follow an overall class-session structure. The first phase is helping the pupils to set personally important goals for themselves; the second phase is the introduction of the topic in order to arouse the pupils' attention, interest and motivation. The third phase is the facilitation of comprehension; and the fourth phase gives an opportunity for reflection. During the introduction students become familiar with the goal of the specific lesson, and the teacher poses some questions for initial discussion to introduce the topic. During the comprehension phase students actively learn and practice new skills; obtain, consider and discuss new information. The reflection phase includes feedback from the teacher (always positive and specific), self-evaluation, repetition and consolidation.

Teachers are encouraged to use this structure during the teaching of other subjects as well, especially regarding personally important goal setting. If the teacher explains why students should obtain and practice this knowledge and skills, the content of the lesson becomes individually more important. Thus students at the end of each lesson become more able to acknowledge their acquired knowledge/skills and evaluate their own progress.

The aforementioned reveals our effort not only to create a program but also provide the network for continuous SEA program implementation and integration in everyday routines.

Educator training is important for successful SEA implementation. Classroom teachers at their schools participated in the continuing education course "Social Emotional Learning in Schools". During the theoretical and practical one-day seminar teachers became familiar with the concept of social and emotional development, the SEA program, they engaged in exercises using the Teacher's Handbook together with the additional materials, and in conducting the SEA lessons in their classes.

After the training of the teachers, the next step was integrating the SEA program in the curriculum at each grade level and conducting 8 SEA class sessions or 2 prosocial activity projects (according to students' age) in each class. During the school year class teachers attended group supervision sessions led by SEA program experts. Each classroom teacher was obliged to present in detail one of the SEA lessons or prosocial activity projects with the focus on her/his own successes, challenges or questions regarding the process and the content. The aim of the supervision was to provide individual support

for the teachers in the implementation of the SEA program, as well as to broaden the teachers' knowledge and understanding of the content and interpretation of different SEA topics. Although every teacher presented only one class session, all of the teachers attended all of the group supervision sessions in order to obtain more knowledge, receive professional and emotional support, and to share their experience with other colleagues. In the supervision group, the teachers spoke about their experience in conducting the class sessions, thus enhancing their individual competence and at the same time developing stronger support and cooperation between the teachers themselves in order to achieve the unified goals. During the school year each classroom teacher spent an average of 6 hours in supervisions.

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 630 class teachers (614 (97%) female and 16 (3%) male with the mean age 45.04 years). These were all the classroom teachers from 39 Latvian schools involved in the implementation of the SEA program. All of them completed the requests of the continuous education course "Social Emotional learning in schools" – participated in the training seminar, conducted all of the program's activities, took part in group supervisions and reflected on their experience. The reflections of the teachers will be illustrated through the prism of specific SEA activity descriptions.

Results and Discussion

Example: SEA Lesson

The lesson plan of an 8th grade SEA class session for the theme "Positive Social Interaction Models." Sub-theme "Communication Obstacles"

Aim: to practice the necessary skills for listening to the discourse partner.

Additional materials: Video of an active listening situation.

Introduction / suggestion. The teacher explains that the goal of the class session is to become familiar with communication skills that the pupils will be able to use to receive more precise information offered by a discourse partner. It will help them to understand each other better and to have better relationships with their peers. The teacher encourages pupils to think about a topic, and asks with what kind of person it is easy to communicate.

Comprehension. Pupils watch a video fragment in which active listening skills are used and the teacher asks students to observe what exactly the listener is doing. (The teacher can do role-play with one of the pupils in front of the whole class as well. The task for the chosen pupil is to describe an interesting recent event or adventure from his/her experience. The teacher listens actively, but the task for the rest of the class is to observe what skills the teacher uses).

The teacher then summarizes and writes "active listening" elements on the blackboard, which include: 1) to repeat the main points of what the partner is speaking about with such phrases as: "So you think that...", "You would like...", "If I understood you correctly then..."; 2) to reflect the emotions of the partner with empathy with such phrases as: "You feel...", "I have a feeling that you..."; 3) to gather more information with questions such as: who? how? what?; 4) to maintain appropriate eye contact; 5) to

pay undivided attention, nod, encourage to tell more. If the role-play has been enacted then the teacher asks the player how he/she felt during the conversation and how easy or difficult the task was. The teacher asks the rest of the class to tell about their observations – which “active listening” methods have been used by the video fragment character or teacher in a case of role-play.

Pupils are divided into groups of three. One describes some event; the second one is the listener who encourages the first to continue the story using the active listening skills; the third one is the observer who checks which techniques “the listener” uses during the conversation. The dialogue takes place for 5 minutes and afterwards students change their roles. The exercise continues until all pupils have played each role. Each group then briefly tells about their observations and conclusions to the rest of the class.

Reflection. The teacher summarizes the class session, for example – today pupils practiced listening to another person, expressing interest in the story told by another, encouraging conversation. The teacher creates positive and specific feedback, for example: “Yes, it was positive how you leaned closer to the speaker and nodded.” At the end teacher asks what the pupils have learned during the class session. It is important that pupils try to evaluate themselves and tell what they have learned.

During the SEA supervision sessions, some teachers reflected that it was challenging for them to articulate the aim of the lesson so that it would be meaningful for their pupils (“Until now I thought that a teacher should know the goal of the lesson, but that there was no need to express this to the pupils. It was useful that in the SEA handbook there was a specific example given of what could be told to the pupils as to why it is necessary for them to learn these skills. Now I will think about how to express to my pupils the goal of the lesson – also for lessons in other subject areas”).

The teachers revealed that it was “conscious work” for them to maintain focus on the aims of the SEA program because some of SEA themes were similar to those of other traditional curriculum subjects, especially social sciences and literature (“Active listening was already familiar to me. We had already practiced this in social science lessons, only we gave this a different name”). This similarity in themes led to the risk that the teachers would automatically conduct the SEA class session according to the usual routine in an informative and didactic way, and that this could provoke resistance from the pupils.

Another challenge mentioned by the teachers is that the SEA program is focused on pluralism – facilitation and respect for different opinions, contrary to their everyday pedagogical practice, which involves seeking the right answer (“In the role play I wanted to point out the mistakes. When some of the pupils were unable to express their opinion, I had a hard time trying not to tell them a ready-made answer” or “The pupils didn’t know what active listening is. In the handbook there should be more information for the teachers so that first we could teach and explain, and only then start the discussion”).

Those teachers who had facilitated pupils’ discussions often admitted that during the SEA class sessions they had noticed various positive traits of pupils which they had not been aware of previously.

The teachers noted that the role-play was an especially important SEA class activity with the emphasis on positive and alternative behaviour models. To make this modelling more natural, some additional video clips were created with the participation of school-age children and youth, as well as popular personalities from different fields. The teachers reported that the pupils accepted the examples offered by peers or well-known persona-

lities more readily, for example, from music or sports. The content of additional video materials promoted the link between pupils' everyday life and learning in school as well as facilitated their perception and assimilation of positive experience. The video material for the specific lesson was role-played by two well-known young Latvian actors ("The pupils recognized them as heroes from the TV series, so it was easier to speak about active listening, because we could discuss situations from the series"). On the other hand, the teachers who had participated in the role-play by themselves sometimes admitted their difficulties ("I did not feel confident that I was any good at the active listening" or "During the role play it was difficult to maintain discipline").

Example: Prosocial Activity Project

Prosocial activity projects are short- or long-term positive activities, which give pupils the opportunity to behave prosocially according to their abilities. In order to reach the aim of the SEA program there are several steps in the implementation of prosocial activity projects.

First, agreement by all members of the group (the entire class) on the purpose of the project – what will be done (for example, pupils decide to give a concert for the kindergarten class).

Second, assignment of roles and responsibilities according to each pupil's ability (who will perform, who will prepare the premises for the concert, design posters, take photos, organize the concert from preparation to realization, etc.). During this step the classroom teacher's role is to discuss and help the pupils to draft a suitable program taking into account the developmental age of both the student group and their target audience.

Third, preparation. During this step it is important to record the process, for example, making photos or video, interviewing.

Fourth, implementation according to the plan as agreed.

Fifth, group review together with the classroom teacher discussing successes and challenges. It is important that pupils can formulate and describe their experience, have an opportunity to acknowledge their individual accomplishments and express their views concerning why it was necessary for each and every student to participate in this project, as well as to enjoy the accomplishment of a job well-done. Usually in this step pupils together with their teacher watch the presentation or video recording about the project preparation and process made by the "news correspondents" (also members of the class).

Sixth, the prosocial activity projects need publicity. Therefore, the final stage is, for example, creating a photo collage and setting it up on the school's information board or writing an article in the school or local newspaper.

The prosocial activities seemed to be familiar to some of the teachers ("We always do the positive parts, such as decorating the hall for school events."). However, the teachers conceded that up to now they had not observed the prosocial project steps during the positive activities ("We never achieve participation from everyone – normally only the more active ones do the work" or "Previously, we did not do the post-project discussion. We always thought one should not boast about one's good deeds"). Thus, teachers noted that they had been pleasantly surprised by the pupils' ability to self-reflect on their gains from the prosocial activity projects ("My students said that they

were positively energized by the project, that they made new contacts and gained opportunities for self-actualization”.

Some teachers recognized that after the SEA class sessions their relationship quality with pupils had improved. Respectively, pupils were more open in discussing their experience; they became more interested in the teacher’s personal opinion, as well as being more friendly and supportive to each other. According to the teachers’ observations, pupils often reminded each other to use some of the behavioural models from the SEA program in everyday situations.

The majority of teachers indicated that the SEA program had been successful in their classrooms. Some teachers revealed their own initial resistance to the acceptance of the psychological concepts underlying the program, which had initially led to an apprehensive stance about the value of the SEA program in general. Almost all of the teachers were particularly positive about the content of the Handbook and additional materials.

Conclusions

With the focus on the SEA program’s sustainability, several steps of action were performed.

First, assessment. An initial research in 25 schools in Latvia revealed insufficient social and emotional competences as one of the risk factors of social exclusion and school drop-out. Those findings approved the necessity of a targeted Social emotional learning program.

Second, development. The SEA program has been developed; the teacher handbook supported by CD with additional work materials has been prepared and initially approrbated. The SEA program included a whole-school approach with the emphasis on 1) proactivity (aimed at all pupils, not only those struggling with different problems) and 2) sustainability (continuous implementation for more than several years).

Third, implementation. The SEA program was introduced and implemented in 39 schools at each grade level. Teachers completed the continuous education course “Social emotional learning in schools”. Regular group supervisions (led by program developers) for all 630 teachers were implemented. Afterwards we invited the best SEA teachers from every region of Latvia and prepared them as SEA supervisors, according to Elias, defined “deep involvement of role model teachers” (Elias, 2010). Simultaneously, we cooperated with the program coordinators in local municipalities to create the network for maintaining achieved practice in subsequent years.

Fourth, evaluation. We are still in the evaluation process. The initial results revealed the program’s short-term impact if the SEA was implemented together with other targeted programs. Statistically significant differences were found between the teachers’ ratings in the schools, which implemented the SEA and other programs, and the control group. The teachers considered relationship quality, cooperation between teachers and pupils, and understanding of positive behaviour habits.

Fifth, reassessment / modification. Now we are in the process of qualitative analysis of the teachers’ written self-reflections after the implementation of the SEA program. According to the teachers’ reflections, some improvements in lesson plans have been made.

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